
Preface

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Funny how things change. . . . A few years ago, I surveyed business leaders, asking them to identify the kinds of skills, attitudes, and behaviors they would like our students to bring to the workplace. I found it interesting that not one individual sought employees with the ability to “sit still and be quiet,” and things like following orders or maintaining the status quo were likewise low on the list. Instead, respondents consistently emphasized critical thinking, creativity, initiative, honesty, and reliability, along with a strong work ethic and an ability to work with others. Outside-the-box thinking got a lot of votes—my favorite from a guy who interviewed prospective hires looking for qualities like “vision and attitude.”

Now at this point, you may want to notice that aside from some overlap on a few of the interpersonal traits, there’s a bit of a discrepancy between the qualities deemed valuable in the workforce and those deemed acceptable in our schools. (Think of how most adults in a school would respond to kids with “vision and attitude.” Even critical thinking can draw fire, much less questioning authority, rules, or the point of a lesson.) Classroom management, especially in regard to inspiring cooperative and respectful student behavior, has always proved challenging for educators. However, earlier in our history, when schools, society, and the workplace were a bit more unified in their fondness for uniformity, top-down hierarchies, and fitting into assigned roles, the problems most teachers encountered paled in comparison to the range, intensity, and even danger a student’s behavior can present today.

Schools have been incredibly slow to catch up with changes in our culture and economy. So many of our traditions—from the way we arrange the furniture in our room to our stubborn attachment to standardization—are throwbacks to a time when these practices supported the work environment many of our students would enter. An increasingly urgent need for change has been evident for some time. Unfortunately, most reforms rarely go beyond repackaging the same old ideas, using them in the same ways and with the same mindset as the ones they were meant to replace.